Chapter 3

The 'Hidden Christians' of the UK University Campus

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Abstract

This chapter is concerned with expressions of Christian identity among university students, asking how the experience of university generates strategies for dealing with cultural and religious difference. In probing this question, it revisits Colin Campbell's (1978) thesis—itself a development of the work of Ernst Troeltsch—about the 'secret religion of the educated classes'. Campbell applies Troeltsch's account of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' to emerging religious trends in the 1960s, highlighting affinities between an adaptive, individualistic religiosity and the cultural identities of a middle class educated demographic. Key to both are individualism, tolerance, and a tendency towards syncretism. The present chapter deploys this framework in considering configurations of Christian identity among present-day undergraduates studying at UK universities. Those engaged in higher education and self-identifying as Christian form an ideal case study for ascertaining whether Campbell's thesis is capable of illuminating patterns of cultural correlation that endure well beyond the 1960s and into the twenty-first century. The chapter concludes by developing a theory of 'hiddenness',

seeking to reveal variant patterns among Christian students, based around concealment (driven by a desire not to be associated with publicly assertive religion), reservation (driven by a desire to sideline or compartmentalise religion in order to accommodate the demands of the university experience), and diversion (driven by an urge to embody Christian identity in novel ways not necessarily amenable to conventional sociological analysis).

Keywords religious identity higher education UK Christianity the secret religion of the educated classes

Introduction: The 'Secret Religion of the Educated Classes'

In 1978, the British sociologist Colin Campbell published an article in the journal *Sociological Analysis* entitled 'The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes'. In this article, Campbell revisits the work of Ernst Troeltsch, whose two-volume *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* provided the foundation for subsequent sociological attempts to categorise religion in terms of dominant organisational forms. Troeltsch's account of Christian history leads to his identification of 'church' and 'sect' as distinctively Christian models of religious community, but Campbell highlights how Troeltsch's work presents not organisational types but religious forms and that he delineates not two but three, the third form being 'Spiritual and

Mystical Religion'.[1] While often forgotten by contemporary sociologists of religion, Campbell argues that 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' is especially useful as a category because it highlights a form of religion that finds growing expression within modern cultures. Moreover, Campbell follows Troeltsch in suggesting that secularisation is most accurately understood not in terms of a fragmentation of traditional forms of community leading to the dissipation of religion, but in terms of a re-location of religion from the community to the individual.

Campbell's account of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion'—an exposition and clarification of Troeltsch's own account—may be broken down into four main interrelated features. First, it is characterised by a philosophy premised on the notion of universal religious consciousness; differences conventionally upheld as setting apart religious traditions are put aside in favour of an affirmation of essential sameness and a corresponding rejection of dualism. Second, it has a related positive disposition towards syncretism and syncretistic expressions of religion, favouring an openness to novelty and diversity over the maintenance of traditional boundaries. Third, religious experience is conceived as taking place independent of religious institutions, fostering a tendency towards the interior life and an openness to a progressive, or evolutionary, form of religious identity. Fourth, it privileges individualism and tolerance as pre-eminent values, the first a reflection of its

[1] For the sake of consistency, I have standardised all references to 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion', as Troeltsch uses a range of terms and Campbell uses 'Mystic' and 'Mystical' interchangeably; thus there does not seem to be a definitive usage in the relevant sources.

celebration of self-determination in religious matters, the second an ethical principle developed from the first.

Troeltsch finds 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' in the mysticism of the seventeenth century, in Romanticism, Pietism, and the Moravian Church. He identifies tendencies rather than discrete movements, highlighting the capacity of this form of religion to exist in relation to a variety of pre-existent traditions. He also finds the same tendency towards individualism, immanence, and a syncretistic mingling of ideas among German Protestant intellectuals of his own time, leading him to point to 'the secret religion of the educated classes' (Troeltsch 1931: 794). This 'secrecy' is in part, as Campbell points out, to do with the way the individualistic character of this form of religion makes it especially difficult to identify or measure, which could mean that it is easily mistaken for secularism (Campbell 1978: 150). Another aspect that renders 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' difficult to distinguish is its congruence with the values of modern life: its elevation of subjective individualism and inter-religious tolerance echoes values upheld within late modern Western cultures, especially among the educated and especially within urban areas. As Campbell comments, 'This form of religion thrives because there are many features of our civilization that foster it' (1978: 152).

Whether it genuinely 'thrives' is a moot point. Campbell was writing with the religious radicalism of the 1960s in mind and, while the 'adaptive advantage' of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' might also be found in related developments among the 'alternative spiritualities' often appropriated from

the Far East and domesticated for Western audiences (Altglas 2014), the vitality of these latter movements is by no means uncontested (Heelas et al. 2005). Issues of durability aside, Campbell's essay is instructive in highlighting (much more explicitly than Troeltsch did) the affinities between an adaptive, individualistic religiosity and the cultural identities of a middle class educated demographic. As he concludes,

> As long ago as 1911 Troeltsch argued that only spiritual and mystic religion was really compatible with modern thought. Sect and church religion he regarded as fundamentally vulnerable in face of the skepticism and relativism that characterised the ethos of an individualistic, urban civilization and must inevitably be on the defensive. Spiritual and mystic religion, however, was not incompatible with this ethos, but, on the contrary, had a basic affinity with the idealistic and aesthetic individualism that was a feature of the educated classes… [in the words of Troeltsch] 'gradually, in the modern world of educated people, the third type (mystical and spiritual religion) has come to predominate' (1931: 381). How prescient these comments now seem, in the light of the events of the late 1960s and early seventies, and especially if 'student' is substituted for 'educated people.' Troeltsch saw clearly how the situation of the modern student, separated from the immediate need to be concerned with a livelihood and immersed in an atmosphere of rationality and individualism would be predisposed to adopt mystical religion. (Campbell 1978: 155)

Campbell's bold summary invites the question of how true his characterisation might be today. Can the same affinities be found among university students in the twenty-first century? Higher education has undergone enormous changes since the time he was writing and most commentators would point to a weakening of its radical edge, as universities have become more target-driven and more bureaucratically governed, while students appear more career-driven and less idealistic. The revolutionary

impulse and cultural experimentation associated with student life in the 1960s seem like a different world now. Yet, aspects of Campbell's account of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' still find echoes among students' orientation to religion, as shall be explicated below, suggesting that his Troeltschian analytical framework might still be helpful in illuminating cultural–religious affinities among today's students. The following discussion draws upon a three-year study of students identifying as 'Christian' at a variety of universities in England. It analyses interview data to explore the ways in which three of the principal aspects of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion'—individualism, tolerance, and a tendency towards syncretism—are evident among these Christian students as they navigate the challenges of university life.

The Hidden Religion of University Students

The 'Christianity and the University Experience' (CUE) project examined the ways in which the experience of being at university shapes the religious and moral orientations of undergraduate students who consider themselves to be Christians. The data were drawn from 13 universities representative of the institutional variations across the higher education sector in England; each of these took part in a questionnaire survey (with a total of 4,500 respondents) and 5 universities served as in-depth case studies. Together, the case studies included 100 semi-structured interviews, 75 with Christian students, the remainder with individuals with a special interest in patterns of religious

expression on university campuses, such as university chaplains, equality and diversity officers, and presidents of student-led religious or secular humanist societies. Interviews with Christian students lasted on average around 45 minutes, took place on campus, and explored how these students' experience of university—including both formal educational and social dimensions—functioned as a context for the expression of their Christian identities. All interviews were professionally transcribed, with subsequent coding and analysis facilitated by the N-Vivo qualitative data analysis software package. The interviewees quoted in this chapter are given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The CUE project, including all of its interviews, was undertaken by the author in collaboration with Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma, and Rob Warner between 2009 and 2012; its main findings were published a year later in *Christianity and the university experience: Understanding student faith* (Guest et al. 2013a).

Accessing the population of Christians within UK universities is fraught with challenges. As national figures on religious identity among students at English universities were not, at that time, systematically collected,[2] we had to identify this population without any sampling frame built around existing data. In addition to practical difficulties, the inevitable

[2] Since the data for the CUE project was gathered, this situation has begun to change. The UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) now collects information on the 'religion or belief' of university students and staff, reflecting greater cross-sector compliance with equality legislation that also requires the collection of data on gender and ethnicity. The inclusion of 'religion or belief'—albeit as a voluntary question—alongside these other measures of social stratification was influenced by the long-term work of Paul Weller at the University of Derby, whose research has brought to light patterns of religious discrimination and provision for minority religions within the UK's public institutions. (See Weller et al. 2011)

problem of definition highlights the risk of skewing the research and misrepresenting the population. How were we to define 'Christian'—by church attendance or membership or perhaps by whether students affirm certain kinds of 'belief', which thereby serve as a measure of legitimacy? If the former, what about the 'Christians' who do not attend church? If the latter, how could we be sure that variant meanings attached to the 'Christian' label would be available for analysis and that we were not simply replicating discourses of orthodoxy normative for some sub-groups within Christianity and not for others? Would our sociological method then not be predetermined by theological presuppositions that ought to be subject to critical scrutiny? Mindful of the research highlighting both the internal diversity of Christian identities and the ways in which such identities are variously performed and embodied (e.g. Day 2013; Guest et al. 2012; Vincett et al. 2012), we decided to ask survey respondents (randomly selected from across the undergraduate population of each participating university) to select their religious identity from a list of options.[3] Moreover, this question was explicitly separated from the question whether respondents felt they were religious or spiritual or neither. Questions about religious beliefs and practices followed from this. This approach allowed us to interrogate the full range of meanings and identities encompassed by the category of 'Christian' among students that avoided—as much as possible—imposing any preconceptions about what this term might mean (Guest et al. 2013a: 211–217). The fact that the population of

[3] Questionnaire respondents were asked 'To what religion or spiritual tradition do you currently belong?' and presented with the following options: 'None', 'Buddhism', 'Christianity', 'Hinduism', 'Islam', 'Judaism', 'Sikhism', 'Other'.

self-identifying Christians emerging from the survey data was highly diverse in religious and moral terms, including some who could be called 'atheist' or 'cultural Christians'[4] and many non-church attenders, suggests that the question did not restrict the survey sample to specific sub-groups or movements. It also means that we can use the data to interrogate how the category 'Christian' is mobilised and applied among the university students who choose to self-ascribe it.[5]

The project's main findings in this respect may be summarised—in very broad brush strokes—with the following five statements. First, self-identifying Christians constitute a wide-ranging population in England's universities that is far from homogeneous in cultural or religious terms; echoing the broader British population, there appear to be a large proportion who fall between the highly committed religious practitioners and the religiously indifferent (Guest et al. 2012). Second, dramatic changes in religious identity during university are very rare; most students perceive a

[4] I use the term 'cultural Christians' here to refer to those who elect 'Christian' when asked to choose between a range of religious categories, but who, when given the opportunity to describe this in their own words, choose to do so in entirely non-religious terms. Some of the CUE respondents who reflect this pattern appear to affirm a kind of 'natal nominalism' (Day 2013: 182), i.e. a claim to Christian identity purely on the basis of being born into and raised within a Christian family, rather than any current religious belief. However, many others affirm a more active—if often relatively inchoate—commitment which, while not based around churchgoing, reflects a level of present-day engagement that cannot be described as 'nominal'.

[5] Our survey data reveals that, among Christian students, those of black and ethnic minority (BME) status were significantly more likely than white Christians to practice their faith in conventional ways (e.g. via Bible reading or church involvement and to say they had become more religious since being at university (Guest et al 2013: 172f.). Unfortunately, low recruitment of BME interviewees means it is not possible to explore this pattern using qualitative data. Building on the argument of the current essay, future research could explore the intersectional relationships between faith and ethnicity via the tropes of hiddenness and visibility, an angle already being pursued in relation to the lives of Muslim students (cf. Brown and Saeed 2015).

stability in their orientation towards religion during this time. Third, churchgoing habits drop off among many Christian students after they have started university, although vacation attendance (usually at their previous 'home' church) remains comparatively buoyant during their university careers. Fourth, the most socially enthusiastic Christians gravitate to evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which thrive in university towns. Fifth, while these evangelical students are often the most visible and audible Christians on university campuses—as well as often the best resourced—they constitute at most 20% of the total population of students identifying as 'Christian'.

Analysis of questionnaire survey data reveals some interesting patterns with respect to professed values among this population of Christian students. A large proportion were uncertain about the theological tenets commonly associated with Christian orthodoxy and the majority were fairly liberal with respect to moral issues. Moreover, and echoing Robin Gill's analysis of national survey data, these patterns appear to have clear correlations with habits of church attendance (Gill 1999). Generally speaking, disengagement from church is positively associated with the affirmation of heterodox religious ideas and with a more permissive and inclusive orientation to moral issues such as homosexuality and the drinking culture popular on UK university campuses.[6] While the survey data allow us to explore correlations in broad terms, they do not permit an analysis of the complex processes of

[6] A more detailed analysis of the CUE project survey data that examines this correlation can be found in Guest et al. 2013a: 49–52.

identity negotiation hinted at in our questionnaire returns. Interviews with Christian students presented a more subtle picture and highlighted the significance that situational factors have in framing how Christian students respond to the university experience. For example, for most, their Christian faith is lived out at university in a way that emphasises the subjective and the relational, rather than the cognitive and doctrinal. Correspondingly, their experience of university posed challenges for their Christian faith, but for most, these challenges were social rather than cognitive. We were far more likely to hear in interviews about the difficulties of being a Christian within campus cultures typified by promiscuity and heavy alcohol consumption than any problems arising from course content that might subvert or challenge religious identities. For these students, being Christian at university was a process of active negotiation and the parameters of this negotiation revealed much about their underlying priorities. In exploring these patterns, Campbell's account of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' is an especially useful heuristic device because it highlights how Christian students orient themselves to their religious identities. Interpreting the interview data through Campbell's emphasis upon individualism, tolerance, and syncretism casts light on the ways in which Christian students offer accounts of themselves that leave room for the heterodox in service of a broader project of affirming cultural civility. What emerges also echoes Troeltsch's notion of a 'secret religion of the educated classes' in so far as an impulse to hide or veil one's Christian identity is a prominent theme, also among those apparently

integrated into church communities.

Individualism

There are many well-rehearsed reasons why the university experience might be associated with the celebration of individuality. As Katherine Brown and Tania Saeed put it, 'attending university is normally viewed as a sign of an aspirational enfranchised and successful individual' (2015: 1953). It is significant that in the UK, periods of expansion in higher education have coincided with a broader cultural valorisation of subjective individualism (during the 1960s) and the aspirational individualism associated with neo-liberalism (from the 1990s onwards), which underlines the strong sociological association between universities and individual empowerment. Insofar as students embody the valorisation of the individual over the group, it would be unsurprising if their orientations to religion were, in some sense, to reflect this. According to Campbell, 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion's' 'most outstanding characteristic' is its individualism (1978: 153), reflected in a lack of concern for fellowship, the lack of an agreed basis for doctrine, and corresponding elevation of the individual as the 'vehicle for religious experience' (1978: 153). Among today's Christian students, the latter is especially emphasised and the notion that the individual has a right to assert his/her own interpretation of his/her experience is largely assumed. Indeed, this finds expression in a form of reflexivity that is arguably heightened by the transitional nature of the university experience itself, which for some

students has triggered a kind of cerebral introspection focused on existential questions of identity and life goals. As one interviewee, Olivia, put it:

> It does really ask the question of who you are, who you want to be and how do you see yourself. It is very, very self-reflective. For me, I can't do that without asking the question of God. (aged 25, white, creative therapy undergraduate)

Carving out a space for oneself can be a major part of achieving a sense of purpose and autonomy and establishing a place within a new church was, for Julia, 'a positive change because it meant I could obviously be my own person'. This is an act of detachment from previous loyalties, an emerging individual identity often defined in distinction from one's parents. Julia continued:

> There's a lot to deal with when you're growing up in the same church as your parents. Sometimes it can be positive but other times it can be hard … especially because my dad was quite high up in the church and he was sort of a lay preacher. And, yeah, I was always identified in conjunction with him rather than as a person in my own right. (aged 26+,[7] white, nutrition and dietetics undergraduate)

Here, the archetypal teenage rebellion—by nature emphasising dramatic extremes—is confined within more narrow boundaries; the transition is within Christianity to a space that grants Julia greater opportunity to exercise choices about the kind of faith she wishes to express. However, just as a break from parental associations affords a greater sense of self-determination, Christian networks offer relatively safe spaces in which autonomy can be felt.

[7] The mature students aged 26 or above were placed within a single category in the CUE survey, designated as '26+' here.

The social contexts of organised Christianity facilitate the expression of individual identities, but without demanding any radical breaks from the past. In this sense, Campbell's stress on the lack of any concern for fellowship is not replicated here, with the Christian declension of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' retaining its attachment to relational and collective involvement. However, this is often engaged as a site for the negotiation of self-realisation, rather than simply for the affirmation of a common faith.

During term time this process also emerges within and through significant relationships forged among one's peers. As Audrey put it, contrasting life at home with her parents with her life at university:

> … coming and living here, it's kind of you're learning … to live with people you've never lived with before; you're learning to kind of build really good, strong friendships with them … you've got to then work out how you apply what you believe into a completely new situation, with a new set of circumstances, a new set of people, and it's kind of really good; because actually I guess it's kind of made me think about what do I actually really believe. (aged 19, white, mathematics undergraduate)

Here, the quest for individual autonomy commonly associated with emerging adulthood is merged with a newly empowered sense of personal religious identity. It is placed among the challenges of a new situation—including a plurality of perspectives and domestic and social upheaval—that triggers a determination to work out a clearer idea of 'who I am'. Having to explain to her non-Christian house mates why she believes what she does has led Audrey to a greater sense of self-understanding and, as she sees it, 'growth'.

The turn to the subjective highlighted in numerous sociological

accounts of late modernity was also in evidence insofar as these students made their faith 'their own'. Brandon (aged 24, white), a theology undergraduate, referred back to a process of change that had its axis in his mid-teens, describing a process of 'turning it [his Christian identity] from something that surrounded me to something that was kind of like inside me'. The ascription of authority to subjective experience was also evident in the way Christian students oriented themselves to the task of finding a church to attend. Friendship networks had a major influence, but alongside a tendency to see churches as potential resources for a personal faith; as mathematics undergraduate Gordon (aged 21, white) put it, 'when I came to [university] I made a point of trying various different churches to see … where I felt God's presence most'. Put in starker terms, highlighting a motivation driven by personal satisfaction, Karen, a physics undergraduate (aged 20, white), talked of finding 'a good church that I really like and I get a lot out of'. While denominational loyalties traceable to family and upbringing remained important for a minority (especially those with Roman Catholic backgrounds), for most, the experience offered to them by a particular church community was paramount. In this sense, the act of choosing among churches at university—perhaps especially in large cities where the range is greater—functions as a means to individual empowerment and interviewees sometimes emphasised the act of trying out different churches, valorising 'choice' and self-determination. As Ben (aged 21, white), studying humanities , put it, 'when I came to [university], I felt I could make my own decision and

I tried a few different churches before I chose one that felt the most natural to me'.

Tolerance

For Campbell, closely related to individualism is the high value placed on tolerance. Rooted in the conviction that all must follow their own unique path in their relationship with the divine, 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' offers a clear rationale for acceptance of the religious other that confers an adaptive advantage within the pluralist contexts of modern life (Campbell 1978: 154). While the term 'tolerance' has cultural familiarity, and is commonly used in policy discourses about equality and multiculturalism, the concept of 'civility' is arguably better at capturing the politics of inter-religious acceptance within late modern Western cultures. James Davison Hunter develops this idea in terms of the value attached to not only being tolerant of others but also being *tolerable to* others, evoking the pressure to modify embodied identities in the interests of social harmony (Hunter 1987: 183).

The notion of civility as a defining feature of what it means to be 'Christian' has been identified in other studies of religion in the British context, particularly among those who do not attend church (Storm 2013). Abby Day writes of 'aspirational nominalists' who often view Christianity in moral terms, representing virtues and values they would hope to embody. Here, Christianity is cast in the language of tradition and respectability and, while Christian students do not tend to share the association of Christianity

with Britishness that Day finds among her working-class interviewees in northern England (Day 2013: 187–188), their affirmations of their religious identities are nevertheless framed by a pervasive form of moral propriety. For some, an emerging civility is expressed in a stark individualism based around a form of Millsian liberalism; for example, Sheila (aged 20, white), a social studies undergraduate, stated: 'I know what I believe in and I'm happy with it, and if somebody else wants to believe something different, then that's fine.' Others were more pastoral in tone, seeking to convey the importance of non-judgement while also echoing Campbell's emphasis on religious experience as peculiar and relative to the individual. For example, asked what it means to be a Christian, Elizabeth stated:

> I think it is different for everybody. Although I never attend church regularly, I still consider myself a Christian and believe in God and feel I could turn to him in times of need. Christianity, and all religions, are a personal thing and I would not like anybody to tell me I'm not a Christian because I don't attend church, nor would I say that to anybody else of any religion. (aged 20, white, science undergraduate)

For these Christian students, the boundary at which religious expression becomes problematic is not defined by the tradition to which a person belongs or the church they attend, but by their mode of expressing their values among those who think differently. Those who aggressively assert their religious values are described as 'pushing' or 'forcing' religion on to people and are viewed as having contravened an important rule of conduct. This rule is largely implicit and thus rarely articulated, yet a consequent disquiet with what are presented as overly evangelistic or judgemental expressions of

religion is almost universally evident. It is worth citing Harold Garfinkel's (1984) insight that it is often only when social rules are transgressed that such rules become visible. What is striking is that we did not ask students directly about evangelism, mission or inter-faith relations; reservations about evangelism emerged within their own accounts of their experience of being a Christian within a university setting. Their apologetic distancing from assertive modes of religious expression was volunteered, as if to pre-empt any scepticism on the part of the interviewer.

The value underlying this repeated refrain is that no one has a legitimate right to speak authoritatively and forcefully into somebody else's life about matters of faith. It would be inaccurate to suggest that this idea is uniformly manifest and, for some, much rests on the *how*, rather than the substance, of religious proclamation. This was reflected by students with evangelical leanings who saw no problem with affirming their faith among others in the hope that they might 'turn to God', but this was often qualified with an acknowledgement that this needs to be done sensitively, not forcefully, and not in a way that treats friendships as instrumental. Among these students, the tone was hesitant, cautious, sometimes unsure, reflecting a deliberate, perhaps conflicted, attempt to reconcile the values of civility and cultural pluralism with the values of evangelicalism (cf. Bryant 2005: 14; Hunter 1987: 183). Yet, while some retained a chastened urge to evangelise, many excluded this notion from their orientation to Christianity altogether. Jessica rationalised this in practical terms, implying an underlying

essentialised core of behavioural propriety that might be a more appropriate measure of judgement than religious tradition as such:

> if someone's got a good relationship with God following say an Islamic faith or something or if someone's perfectly happy as a Jew and feels close to God and is being nice in the community and is pretty devout and that, I'm not going to go and tell them that they're being heretics or whatever. (aged 21, white, mathematics and computer science undergraduate)

Others appeared to have never considered evangelism as being a part of the Christian faith and, out of personal discomfort or a more pre-eminent concern to be respectful of others, had no inclination to engage in it now.

It is worth noting that the interviews with students suggest the urge to maintain respectfulness towards others of different perspectives is not simply upheld as a general mode of interpersonal engagement. Rather, it is expressed and negotiated within conversation, including strategies for the avoidance of conflict. In this sense, 'tolerance' emerges not as an unquestioned and static cultural value, but as an underlying set of instincts about how certain issues are best managed within everyday discourse. For example, Martha was asked whether she spoke to her friends about religious matters:

> Interviewer: Do you talk to them about matters to do with religion?
> Martha: We used to more when we were in high school, but now we don't really talk about that kind of thing. It's just something we don't talk about.
> Interviewer: Why do you think that is? It's interesting, isn't it, choosing not to talk about it.
> Martha: I guess it's to avoid conflict. Because it's one of those things there's no right or … you can never prove your right answers. You could argue all day long and still not have an answer. So, I guess, unless you're a theology student and want to argue all day long, it's

easier not to. (aged 20, white, biological sciences undergraduate)

Evident here is a sense of discomfort with having to face religious differences directly within conversations among friends as well as with the kind of discussion that has little chance of resolution. The contrast with high school is also interesting and reinforces other evidence which suggests that universities are places in which the challenges of identity differences are magnified (Sharma and Guest 2013), heightening an existing tendency to paper over or avoid open discussion of them. The strongly embedded value of tolerance of the other and acceptance of difference is perhaps not a surprising finding among this demographic. However, we might also expect to see a strong counter-narrative to emerge from evangelical students, especially from those involved with Christian organisations on campus which maintain mission and inter-student evangelism as a principal objective (Guest et al. 2013b). But in interviews, even professed evangelical students generally maintained a subdued and qualified endorsement of evangelism at best, illustrating how pervasive and culturally dominant such underlying assumptions about 'proper' human conduct really are.

If Christian students cite a cultural 'other' against which they define their own perspective, this is more likely to be defined by secularist–atheist discourses perceived as aggressively antagonistic to people of faith. Indeed, this opposition serves as a discursive medium for reinforcing the ethic of civility that is so dominant, for 'new atheists' are 'othered' as examples of how such values are transgressed. Reflecting on a friend and house mate who

happened to be a Muslim, Alicia (aged 24, white) commented: 'I feel more similar to her than [to] people without faith.'

Syncretism

It is equally striking that emphasising individual choice alongside an affirmation of acceptance of religious 'others' does not appear to foster a tendency towards religious syncretism. Most accounts of Christianity among interviewees and questionnaire respondents could not be described as orthodox in the theological sense, but their lack of doctrinal or moral specificity was not accompanied by an incorporation of ideas from non-Christian sources. This is the most significant way in which contemporary Christian students differ from the accounts of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' offered by Troeltsch and by Campbell. The eclecticism identified by both—almost argued as a logically necessary consequence of individualism and tolerance by Campbell—is hardly in evidence at all among the Christian students who took part in the CUE study. From one perspective this is not surprising; they are affirming Christian identity, so we may expect the boundaries of this identity to be framed by inherited and culturally normative understandings of distinctively Christian beliefs and values. However, broader evidence suggests that self-identifying Christians among younger generations are not distinguished by a core set of theological notions that can be described as traditionally Christian, but by more general religio-moral inclinations (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010; Smith and Denton 2005).

The very few examples of students who gravitated towards an orientation to faith being open to integrating a variety of different traditions expressed this as a pragmatic preference. One interviewee, Eva, reflected on encounters with more alternative lifestyles and practices on campus:

> I do believe in alternative therapies just to give it a try, but I know a lot of people who are very sceptical. And, I've done stuff like Pilates and a bit of yoga, and it's very calming if nothing else, but I don't necessarily believe it's spiritual, but it's calming and I think if I was going [to] pick a religion, I'd probably pick something like Buddhism; it's very nice. But, then obviously you can't go to war and you can't do this, that, and the other, and sometimes that's necessary. So, I think, if I was to pick a religion, I'd just pick a mash-up. (aged 19, white, social studies undergraduate)

It is possible that so-called 'alternative spiritualities' have now largely been absorbed into popular understandings of how health and wellbeing may be maintained, effectively ruling out particular constellations of religious syncretism, simply by placing what are now fairly mainstream practices—e.g. yoga and meditation—within a different category of experience. Resources affirmed as positive, as in the quotation above, are also likely to be presented as vehicles for the promotion of individual agency and inter-personal harmony, just as Christianity is by so many self-identifying Christian students.

The more 'popular heterodoxy' (Voas and Day 2010: 9) that emerges among Christian students is not a loose aggregation of Christian ideas combined with alternative spiritualities, paganism or fragments of traditions imported from the East, but a more morally informed but loosely defined essentialism. Indeed, it is in speaking about those of other religions that

Christian interviewees affirm most clearly their sympathy for an essentialist model of religion that cuts across religious traditions and is instead defined more by moral principles centred on respect, unfussy moral compassion and generosity, integrity of commitment and consistency of application. This serves as an inchoate but effective discursive resource, applied as a means of celebrating cultural–religious diversity without denying the seriousness of faith. Comparisons can be drawn with the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism identified by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton in their study of American teens (Smith and Denton 2005: 162–170), but the comparison has its limitations. What the interviews with UK-based Christian students reveal is not simply a static orientation to life that can be reduced to core ideas about divinity and ethical conduct, for this would be to miss the dynamic processes of identity negotiation which are mirrored in the interview transcripts and which were evidently happening within the interview encounter itself. It is worth highlighting the loaded context of these conversations: students are navigating the discursive terrain of an interview, on the one hand, free to speak without so many obvious pressures coming from peers, fellow church members or Christian leaders, while, on the other hand, they are invited to offer an account of their faith within an environment heavily coloured by the values of free enquiry, intellectual rigour, and verbal eloquence. This is not to say that the Christianities 'performed' during the interviews were in any way inauthentic, but it would be naïve not to acknowledge how this context valorises and legitimises certain kinds of ideas and forms of speech over

others. Interviewees' discussion of the behaviours emerging from Christian identities was also clearly framed by a concern to exhibit an engaged civility towards people of differing perspectives to their own: interested and thoughtful, but ultimately accepting. Yet, there is no denying the patent enthusiasm with which many Christian students involve themselves in on-campus mission activity and the life of evangelical churches that sometimes uphold teachings somewhat at odds with this pervasive tolerance. The evidence cited above suggests a situationally determined expression of identity, both reflecting and negotiating the contested nature of Christianity as a live category.

To take one example, in a strikingly reflexive interview, the situational and unsettled nature of Christianity as a category was illustrated by Sam who navigated the identity politics of religion by shifting affiliation according to context:

> Interviewer: So, would you call yourself a Christian now if someone asked you?
> Sam: If an atheist asked me, yes. If a Christian asked me, probably not. I like to play—it's not that I like to play devil's advocate, but I end up doing it. If I'm in a room full of atheists and they're knocking religion, I would feel the need to defend it. But if I was in a room of Jehovah's Witnesses or Christians with a very Christian agenda, I would feel the need to draw the reigns in and argue against them. I would say, I'm Christian in terms of background but I don't want it to sound wishy washy. I like Christians I would say, whether or not I am one, I like people who are and so, you know, I'm going to put my flag in the ground for Jesus and I like reading St Paul and I like reading Martin Luther and people who knew what they were about. It may be because I'm not sure myself. (male, aged 20, white, theology undergraduate)

Part of the tendency towards an uncertain prevarication has to do with what

might be called the 'heightened identity negotiation' characteristic of university life (Guest 2015). The upheaval of the university experience, with its liminality and multiple intellectual and social stimuli, fosters a sense of the fluidity of identity; yet, research shows how structures of class, gender, and ethnicity continue to frame the perceived limitations of personal experience and self-reinvention among university students (Bathmaker et al. 2013; Mountford 2014; Sharma and Guest 2013). In this sense, the presumed scope of identity fluidity is not reflected in the evidence, which illustrates how Christian identity—while not confined to traditional theological parameters—is nevertheless framed by dominant social and moral norms. What emerges are not creative permutations of religious syncretism, but a performative, strategic expression of religious civility. The differences between Christianity and other traditions are not reconfigured or reinforced, but fully managed in the interests of maintaining a discourse of congeniality and an ethic of respectfulness.

Interrogating 'Hiddenness'

While it is possible to identify a broad sub-population among Christian students who remain ostensibly 'hidden' from view because of their non-engagement with traditional forms of Christian worship and community, the evidence cited above reveals that a certain tendency towards 'hiddenness' is discernible across the Christian student population, also among those who are regular churchgoers. The elements of Campbell's 'secret religion' identifiable

among them—a subjective individualism and cultural civility—point to inclinations that shape how Christian identity is lived and negotiated in relation to the university experience. Furthermore, while the population of Christian students includes some important divergences (including those associated with different modes of church engagement), the privileging of subjective individualism and cultural civility within an understanding of Christian identity is discernible across evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Methodists, cultural Christians, and nominal Christians.

To invoke the notion of the 'hidden Christian' is to invite the questions of 'hidden by whom and how?' as well as the crucial 'why?'. For some Christian students, to be hidden from view—perhaps from the researcher's view—is part and parcel of a broader tendency whereby university life overtakes previously established priorities. After citing her relationship with Jesus as a reason why she did not ultimately feel alone when she arrived at university, Sheila described how much she struggled to maintain regular Bible reading:

> I think it's just sitting down and spending time reading; it's hard on you and it's hard to motivate yourself. I do have like little books that I read, like a study guide book, but like right now when you've got your dissertation, the last thing you want to do is get another book out and start reading that. It's just, yeah, you don't want to do it. (aged 20, white, social studies undergraduate)

In some respects, a subjectively affirmed intimacy with Jesus or God is easier to maintain than practical commitments that demand dedicated time; the 'study lethargy' cited also shows how new priorities can erode Christian

identities that compete for one's time. Other students acknowledged how this process can be driven by more hedonistic factors: the excitement of Saturday night often won out over the obligations of Sunday morning. But this secularisation by gradual displacement is not the entire story—Christian identity is often hidden as part of a more self-conscious, deliberate process. Constrained by lack of space, what follows is a preliminary attempt to theorise 'hiddenness' as an active process reflective of important strands of identity construction among Christian students. These are not presented as discrete or mutually exclusive categories, but as forms of an impulse to 'hiddenness' identifiable among the Christian student population.

One major strand may be characterised as *concealment* or the urge to subdue or hide Christian identity from public view. This was largely driven among Christian students by a self-conscious concern not to be associated with forms of religious expression deemed offensive, 'pushy' or judgemental. Here, the relatively compressed environment of the university campus is important, as are the normative socialities of student life. A closely quartered population of several thousand, many living and working in close proximity, makes for a context characterised by heightened social visibility. Conscious of wider perceptions of organised religion that focus on rigidity, outdated traditionalism, and a tendency to judge outsiders, it would be understandable if those of a generation that emphasises self-determination and cultural inclusivity were to subdue or conceal their pre-university religious affiliations. The language of the personal in evidence above permits a

legitimisation of this tendency by reinforcing a sense that religious identities are properly handled as private matters (Dalessandro 2015: 7–9).

Another strand reflects the tendency to re-organise or compartmentalise religious commitment in an attempt to manage the life priorities students consider most salient as they embark on their university career. I call this *reservation*. American sociologist Tim Clydesdale has uncovered a similar phenomenon among college students in the USA, whose 'first year out' is characterised by the placing of religious concerns within an 'identity lockbox', temporarily put aside to be returned to at a later time. Clydesdale discovered that the college experience finds young people instead prioritising the daily management of social lives and relationships as well as economic upkeep (Clydesdale 2007: 39–41). The focusing of energies on negotiating Christian identities chiefly in relation to personal relationships may be another manifestation of this, perhaps reflecting an 'affective essentialism' that foregrounds the on-campus quest for personal happiness, harmony, and fulfilment, clothed in the language of 'being Christian'. There is much evidence in the CUE interview data to support this and other research into campus religion in the USA points to similar patterns (e.g. Wilkins 2008).

A third strand might be called *diversion*: the self-conscious seeking out of novel ways of expressing Christian identity. Here, Campbell's comments about the shift away from institutional forms of religion are especially resonant; we might expect a discomfort with organised religion to trigger a quest for alternative channels through which attachments to Christianity

might be lived out. Empirical substantiation here faces obvious methodological challenges, as, by definition, novel expressions of religion occur in places where researchers tend not to look. When research methods become habitual, they tend to re-instantiate deeper assumptions about where religion can be found and where it properly belongs, as the history of the secularisation debate attests. Progress in understanding such acts of diversion demands some rethinking of our theoretical frameworks as well as our methods of data collection and analysis.

Conclusion

Revisiting Campbell's engagement with Troeltsch has cast fresh light on the distinctive patterns of identity among Christian students. The concept of 'Spiritual and Mystical Religion' illuminates the affinities between parallel trends in Western culture and in changing expressions of Christianity, with the lack of religious syncretism among Christian students reflecting strands of adaptive individualism that foreground a moral essentialism rather than the exoticism or eclecticism once heralded as the future of religion in the West. Other recent research in the sociology of religion has taken note of expressions of religious significance that extend beyond spaces that have traditionally preoccupied the discipline, such as regular Sunday worship. Theories of secularisation and differentiation may have acted as 'theoretical blinders', preventing us from seeing more subtle manifestations of religion that fall between conventional spaces and practices (Cadge and Konieczny

2014: 558). The preceding analysis has begun to trace how expressions of Christian identity might be extended in this way, subject to a process of negotiation, whereby deep-seated Western values of individual autonomy, tolerance, and civility are refracted through a lens coloured by culturally dispersed fragments of Christian symbolism and tradition. Future research into Christianity in Western contexts will need to cast its net wide in order to capture emerging subtleties of influence and embodied practice, while also remaining sensitive to the way reconfigurations of the social sphere open up new possibilities of religious expression. The shifting boundaries between work and home would be an important example (Hochschild 1997), as this generates a re-location of the 'private' sphere and hence raises new questions about how religion might occupy it. Existing research on contemporary expressions of Christian identity suggest that other fruitful avenues would examine the finer distinctions among forms of Christian nominalism (Day 2013), the discursive uses of 'fuzzy fidelity' (Voas 2009), and the social significance of friendship networks as contexts of religious expression (Sharma and Guest 2013). While the evidence from the CUE project reveals a form of Christian deregulation that is heavily limited, it also reveals a preference for reflexivity and personal agency that defies easy confinement within conventional categories of collective involvement.

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